

Body-Building

We have been exploring together, and have seen how the historical death of Jesus was not a mere single-dimension event. Contrary to much popular opinion, his death was not just to rescue us from condemnation and give us a 'ticket to heaven', but it is the key to a totally different quality of life which we can experience now. He did not only die in our place, he took us with him in his death, and in his resurrection, **and** in his glorification.

As the direct result of being joined to him in his death, we find ourselves not only pronounced blameless before God, but also liberated from slavery to sin and failure, from self-centredness, from religious rules and from the corrupt world system. And, by being joined to his resurrection, we have this new quality of resurrection life: *"Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."* (**Romans 6:4-5**)

All of this is totally by the grace of God; there is nothing we can do to earn it; no 'spiritual disciplines' or other man-made so-called 'means of grace' can enhance it in any way. It is all ours because our Father has placed us in his Son, because we are 'in Christ'. All we can do is **receive** from him what he has already accomplished for us. The Greek word translated 'receive' is an active word meaning 'take to yourself'. Not sitting back and passively waiting for it to somehow waft over us, but actively taking hold of what we have begun to see as part of our inheritance in Christ. It's an ongoing process and, as I have said before, I find that the simplest way to start taking hold of fresh truth like this is to tell the Lord what I have begun to see and tell him that I am taking my stand on it – preferably speaking to him out loud!

And that amazing part of our inheritance, that the Holy Spirit not only lives **inside** us, transforming us from the inside, but is also poured out **upon** us, just as he was on the ancient prophets, bringing us prophetic gifts and an awareness and understanding of the mind of God – which seems to be an outrageous claim! Please do read **1 Corinthians 2:6-13** again.

Again, this is all by the grace of God, because we have been joined with Jesus, specifically in his glorification at the right hand of the Father.¹ There has often been a subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) idea that spiritual gifts are some sort of special award, only given to special people, maybe because they are (or think they are!) extra spiritual in some way. That is total rubbish, and also dangerously implies that spiritual gifts are an end in themselves, some sort of goal to aim for, so that, once you have achieved it, you can fool yourself into thinking that you have 'arrived'.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

Before we go any further, I hope we are beginning to see that spiritual gifts are designed to be a normal part of our new life in Christ. They have been both over-emphasised and over-criticised for many years, with the result that they can easily become a 'no-go

¹ See **John 7:37-39** and **Acts 2:33 & 36** for the strong link between his glorification and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

area' for many Christian believers. Too controversial, for all sorts of reasons, and so better avoided. And what's the point of them, anyway? Not worth getting involved with something like that which seems to achieve nothing and only causes sharp disagreements! But there they are in the New Testament, with Paul writing about them in a calm and practical way.

If we are still dubious about them, then at least we need to look carefully at what he says before jumping to any conclusions or accepting any ready-made opinions from others. If we feel disposed to reject them, we will need to be very sure of our reasons for disagreeing with Paul! If we have a more positive view, it is important that we find a proper scriptural and balanced understanding of where and how they fit in, and not add to the confusion and controversy by adopting extremist positions.

Although some of these gifts are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, the key chapters are **1 Corinthians 12 & 14**. In earlier chapters of this letter to the Church in Corinth, Paul has already needed to tackle some disunity problems head-on, and it seems that the Corinthian believers were probably facing some misunderstandings in the area of spiritual gifts, some of them again related to disunity. So, although these two chapters are our chief source for teaching on the subject, they seem to have been written with a view to correcting misunderstandings and putting things back on a right track.

Most of us have probably read these chapters and asked ourselves "Have I got any of these gifts?", or "Does anyone I know have any of these gifts?" What were we looking for? Individual people with special gifts and, yes, Paul does say in **12:11** "*distributing to each one individually just as he wills*", and the word translated 'individually' does mean very personal to that one individual.

But have we missed the whole context of these chapters? It is **body, togetherness, sharing, mutual benefit**. Instead of asking whether an individual has any of these gifts – whether that's myself or anyone else – the real question is "Do we have these gifts in our midst?"

And that's where it may begin to get more difficult. Do we have a sense of belonging together in fellowship that can share and grow like this? I am not asking whether we belong to an organised group, but whether we have anything like what those believers in Corinth had. A gathering of equals who have different ways in which the Holy Spirit works through us, resulting in benefit for all.

Yes, the Holy Spirit distributes "*to each one individually **just as he wills***" (**12:11**) and in **12:18** Paul says that "*But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, **just as he desired***." That 'just as' means 'in exactly the same way as'. There is absolutely no coincidence in either the distribution of gifts or the placing of members of the body. Just as God has assembled the human body with unique abilities given to different organs, so he assembles people together who have vastly different abilities, not to cause chaos but to learn to function together as a body, each contributing to the good of the whole.

The underlying principles for all spiritual gifts are "*to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good*" (**12:7**) and "*let all things be done for edification*"

(14:26). Two lovely words there: **Manifestation** means ‘shining out’, so there is no way that we can manufacture any of these gifts ourselves; either they ‘shine out’ from the Holy Spirit at work through us, or they don’t. **Edification** is almost meaningless in today’s language, but the Greek word means simply ‘building the house’.¹ The whole context is the building up of the Church, which is what Paul says these spiritual gifts are designed for.

He even takes the example of ‘speaking in tongues’ – controversial then as it is now – and looks at its benefits and limitations. Yes, it is beneficial, but only to the individual, and Paul insists that the real benefit to the Church fellowship is if people prophesy, i.e. speak out what God is saying, in the common language. But if someone there has the gift of interpretation, then ‘tongues plus interpretation’ more or less equals prophecy. The key factor is the common good, the building up of the Church.

Interest in spiritual gifts comes and goes. A few years (or decades!) ago, it seemed that everyone was talking about them, especially that controversial one, speaking in other languages. The so-called ‘charismatic movement’ was largely based on a recognition of the validity of spiritual gifts, whereas previously they had been regarded as irrelevant and/or dangerous, at least by the evangelical ‘mainstream’. Some people may now believe that they have ‘been there, done that’ and that the emphasis placed on spiritual gifts was misplaced and may even have been completely mistaken. There may be some reading this who wish that I would stop talking about them, but please bear with me for a little while.

As we have seen, Paul places these gifts solidly in the framework of the local Church, in the practical relationship between believers, especially as they meet together, with the gifts being means of helping each other to grow spiritually.

What seems to have happened, at least to some extent, is that spiritual gifts have ‘gone rogue’ because they have not been fitting in to the corporate life of the Church. Part of the responsibility for that lies with those who exercise the gifts, and part lies with those who would like to control their use in the Church – and often that control might take the form of a **theoretical** acknowledgement of their value, while doing all they can to keep them from actually being exercised. Let’s face it, the exercise of spiritual gifts, especially when they are exercised without any prior arrangement, can be disruptive in the extreme.

But let’s look at the wider picture and ask ourselves an important question: How is the Church supposed to grow? I’m thinking about growth in maturity, not so much about numbers. Can we forget for a moment that we have been talking about spiritual gifts, and just look at the way the Church actually grows?

It’s obvious from **1 Corinthians 12** and especially **14**, that Paul sees that growth is the priority. His repeated use of the words ‘edify’ and ‘edification’ underlines this. He says very much the same in **Ephesians 4:11-16**, especially **v.16** itself: “. . . we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom **the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies,**

¹ See [Building the House](http://www.justonecandle.uk) from www.justonecandle.uk

according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” No specific mention of spiritual gifts here, but the same principle that **each one**, each member of the Body of Christ, is a vital part of the growth of the Church. I do love the original Greek here, which actually says “the working **in measure** of each individual part”. We are none of us called to do the whole thing, but to be working in the measure that we have been given, large or small. That is what causes “the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love”.

With such clear and specific teaching about how the Church is designed to grow, how is it that we seem to disregard it and try all sorts of other ideas that we have dreamed up ourselves?

The same clear direction turns up in other places, not specifically teaching about this way of growing together, but showing that it is a normal part of life as we share together:—

*“ . . . be filled with the Spirit, **speaking to one another** in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. ” (Ephesians 5:18-21)*

*“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom **teaching and admonishing one another** with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:16)*

So, hopefully we may have reached the understanding that growth in the Church needs each member to be ‘working in measure’ and contributing whatever they have to see the ‘house’ being built together. Can we now look at how the use of ‘spiritual gifts’ can be a vital part of that process?

Perhaps it would be good if we strip away that evocative phrase ‘spiritual gifts’ and simply consider again the result of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon us. Clearly, there is a close link with the way that the Spirit ‘came upon’ prophets in the Old Testament, and they were enabled to speak in the name of the LORD; that classic hallmark of the prophet: ‘Thus says the Lord’. As we have already seen in **1 Corinthians 2:6-13**, “we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God”.

If we are getting to know the things which God has given us, the very least we will want to do is pass them on to our Christian brothers and sisters. I believe that is exactly what happens when we responsibly exercise the gifts of the Spirit.

And if the Lord is saying that this is the way that he has designed his Church to be built up and grow together, the very least we need to do is to make room for that to happen.

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